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Group of Experts on Euro-Asian Transport Links

Ninth session
Geneva, 4–5 February 2014

Report of the Group of Experts on Euro-Asian Transport Links on its ninth session

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I. Attendance

1. The Group of Experts on Euro-Asia Transport Links (EATL) held its ninth session on 4–5 February 2014 in Geneva. Representatives of the following Member States of the United Nations participated: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Latvia, Mongolia, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

2. Representatives of the following United Nations departments and specialized agencies attended the meeting: Trans-European Railway (TER) Projects were present.

3. The following intergovernmental organizations were represented: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

4. The following non-governmental organizations were represented: International Union of Railways (UIC).

5. At the invitation of the secretariat, the Piraeus Port Authority, Taranto Port Authority, City University of Hong Kong Centre for Transport, Trade and Financial Studies, Iran Oston consulting engineers corporation and PLASKE also attended the meeting.

II. Adoption of the agenda (agenda item 1)

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6. The Group of Experts adopted the agenda (ECE/TRANS/WP.5/GE.2/17).

III. Identification of cargo flows that could be transported along the Euro-Asian transport links (agenda item 2)

7. The Group of Experts had a substantive exchange of views about the identification of the types of maritime cargo that may be transported overland, particularly by rail. The Group identified a range of items that might be considered for overland (rail) transport, although they it thought that the issue asks for further debate and analysis.

8. The Group of Expert was of the opinion that the group of 'lighter' products including cars, automobile components, computers, electronic equipment and their parts (TV sets, image and sound recording and reproducing equipment), optical and medical equipment, clothes, shoes, sports-related items, as well as food represents products which may qualify for overland (rail) transport. The identified cargo for overland transport is relatively light (weight-wise), is not bulky and some of it may be rather expensive. In order to more concretely identify types of cargo that could be transported along the Euro-Asian transport links and have a deeper insight in the potential development opportunities relating to EATL, the Group of Experts decided to invite shipping and forwarding companies to the tenth session.

IV. Facilitation of coordination of integrated time schedules and tariffs along the Euro-Asian transport links (agenda item 3)

9. The development of overland transport services asks for cooperation and coordination of rail operators along the identified EATL routes. In this regard, presentations by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) TER Project Central

Office and the UIC emphasized difficulties in coordinating and obtaining tariffs along the EATL routes which hinders a smooth and competitive operations by railways. There was also a discussion about challenges, limits and opportunities that provide high-speed trains. The Group of Experts was informed by the Russian Federation about the project and goal to have rail cargo transport on the entire trans-Siberian route in less than seven days.

10. Although it is time consuming, costly and difficult to obtain quotes, the UNECE presented results of the first project which compared eight different rail transport scenarios between Asia and Europe. Even though there were certain methodological difficulties, the results have demonstrated that rail had an absolute advantage regarding delivery time on overland Euro-Asian routes versus the maritime ones, in addition to certain cost advantage.

11. Rail transport has its potential, but in order to become more competitive and benefit from it, integrated tariffs and time schedules should be agreed. The secretariat offered to work closely with interested railway authorities and other stakeholders in order to identify the ways that these integrated tariffs and time schedules should be created and agreed.

12. Furthermore, in order to timely and efficiently moves ahead with its adopted programme of work, the Group called upon railway authorities and operators to collaborate closely with the secretariat in providing it with the required information on current tariffs and time schedules of trains operating on Euro-Asian transport links.

V. Information from participants on recent developments regarding transport infrastructure priority projects along the EATL routes (agenda item 4)

13. Under this agenda item the Group of Experts was informed about recent developments and EATL related problems by the representatives from several countries and institutions.

14. The representative from Afghanistan reported on the investment plans and priority projects in road and rail infrastructure and their funding. The importance is given to the North-South and East-West transit links, as well as to the internal ring road in the country. The representative from China informed the participant about efforts to revive the overland EATL Silk Road and the maritime 'Silk Road'. There are three overland Silk Road (northern, central and southern) corridors in China. This country is also active in Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC). In support of the EATL, China is enhancing technical level of cross-border transportation corridors, further facilitating transport operations and promoting logistics data exchange.

15. The representative of Latvia informed the Working Party about the ideal position of his country as a gateway to and distribution centre for Northern Europe. Both overland and maritime transport-related facilities enhance such a favourable commercial location. The representative of the Russian Federation presented information about developments of EATL from Sakhalin (building of a link to the mainland) to the western frontiers of the Russian Federation, as well as the ring transport connection around the Black Sea and the intention of the Russian Federation to move containers by rail from the Far East to the western border of the country in less than seven days. In addition, there is a strong cooperation in transport with Belarus and Kazakhstan. There is also investment in the ring road around Moscow to reduce congestion in the city and increase the speed and efficiency of transport. The representative of Turkey informed about its location as the natural bridge between East and West. It has a favourable access to three big seas and overland (road and rail) location for transit and distribution. Turkey is tackling problems with the hinterland

connections to its ports. He also proposed close cooperation among railway companies in the region.

16. The City University of Hong Kong Centre for Transport, Trade and Financial Studies presented its vision about the comparative advantage of EATL, especially about Europe-Asia corridors and trade supply chains (e.g. urban development in Western China). There are potentials for cost reduction and increased efficiency in production, transport and trade. The identified goods that may be transferred from maritime to overland transport include relatively light (weight-wise) good such as vehicles parts and computers. The Port of Piraeus informed about its favourable location for ships, it is the first big port once the ships enter the Mediterranean Sea from the Suez Canal. This port is the largest terminal for imports of cars to Eastern Europe and very shortly will have rail connection with Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe. The port of Piraeus has almost doubled its overall throughput in the period 2011 – 2013 and is further expanding its capacity through heavy investments.

17. The Port of Taranto also informed about its favourable location and hinterland connections. Economic crisis reduced this port's business especially since 2011. The Italian Government decided in 2012 to revitalise the Port of Taranto and improve its logistic capacity (piers, logistic centres and rail connections) in order to offer competitive transport services, particularly to (southern) Germany and other countries in Central Europe. The objective of the port is to become the most important intermodal and logistics hub in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea.

18. Iran Oston consulting engineers corporation informed delegates about recent progress in infrastructure development in Iran. The country's priority is to expand its road and rail infrastructure, especially along the EATL routes. For instance, travel time of 2.5 hours for light vehicles and 5 hours for heavy vehicles on the existing road is reduced to less than half on a newly constructed Khoram Abad-Pole Zal and Pole Zal-Andimeshk freeways (as one of the North-South bottleneck connections). Iran has successful experiences about the implementation of many public private partnership projects in the field of construction of freeways. In addition, Iran wants to construct the shortest freeway route between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, the shortest railway route between Imam, Abbas and Chabahr ports on one side and West coast and East coast of the Caspian Sea on the other.

19. The OSCE also expressed its continuing support to the EATL project.

20. The Group of Expert **decided** to request Governments and other stakeholders to provide the secretariat with new data and studies relating to the EATL project. It further **requested** the secretariat to disseminate such information to the EATL group, as well as other interested parties.

21. The Group **acknowledged** and praised the active participation (presence and country presentations) of the following countries: Afghanistan, China and Iran. The Group also **encouraged** more countries and other stakeholders to participate in and actively contribute to its work, in particular, more participation from academia (scientists and researchers such as Professor John Liu from Hong Kong City University at 9th session).

22. The Group of Experts further **decided** to request the secretariat to upload all presentations on the website in order to provide access to those documents to the participants that were not present in the meeting.

23. Finally, the Group of Experts **encouraged** Governments and other donors to provide support, in particular financial, to the EATL activities.

VI. Information updating the Geographical Information System (agenda item 5)

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24. The secretariat informed the Group of Experts about the technical, organisational and financial options for the development, extension and updating of the EATL GIS application. As this is a formidable task, the Group of Experts decided to request the secretariat to inform the Governments about the new options for the EATL GIS and ask for their guidance.

25. The Group of Experts **acknowledged** the report presented by the secretariat and requested members to submit 'work-in-progress' reports on the GIS status in their countries.

VII. Other business (agenda item 6)

26. There were no proposals and discussion under this agenda item.

VIII. Date of next meeting(s) (agenda item 7)

27. The Group of Experts **agreed** on the dates for the next sessions:

(a) Tenth session, 27–28 May 2014, Geneva;

(b) Eleventh session, 30–31 October 2014, Geneva;

(c) Twelfth session, 4-5 February 2015, Geneva;

(d) Thirteenth session, 9-10 June 2015, Geneva;

(e) Fourteenth session, 14-15 September 2015, Geneva.

IX. Summary of decisions (agenda item 8)

28. The Group noted that this type of exchange of information and views proved to be constructive and needs to be continued in the future.

29. In accordance with the established practice, the Group of Experts **adopted** a list of decisions and asked the secretariat to prepare a report on the outcome of the session.